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THE PLACE OF APOCALYPTICAL CONCEPTIONS IN THE MIND OF JESUS

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ABOUT twenty years have now passed since the apocalyptic theory of the Gospels came to the fore-front, and controversy has had time in the interval to follow the usual course. Extreme positions were at first adopted on either side. There were many scholars, liberal as well as conservative, who fought against the new interpretation, while others espoused it with a juvenile ardour, and insisted, like Schweitzer, that the teaching of Jesus must all be resolved into a "consistent eschatology". Since then the opinions on both sides have grown more moderate. It cannot be said that any full agreement is yet in sight, but at any rate we have learned to approach the question dispassionately. Those who were frightened by the new hypothesis have now got accustomed to it, and are willing to acknowledge that at some points it answers to the facts. Those who were dazzled by its novelty are coming to see it in due perspective, and to do justice to other aspects of the thought of Jesus which they formerly left out of account.

That Jesus was in sympathy with the apocalyptic hopes of his time and that he understood them in no merely metaphorical sense, can now be regarded as certain. He took up the message of John the Baptist, who undoubtedly announced a Kingdom of God such as the people were looking for. He proclaimed his gospel in terms which bore a definite apocalyptic meaning, and we cannot believe that he perplexed his hearers by employing them in some new esoteric sense of his own. His sayings about

the nature of the Kingdom and the manner of its coming can be paralleled again and again from the surviving apocalyptic literature. Add to all this that the primitive church admittedly looked for his return in Messianic glory to inaugurate a visible Kingdom of God. There is indeed every ground for believing that the church accentuated the apocalyptic note in his message. Not only were the disciples very ordinary men, who would interpret in a crude and literal sense much that he may have spoken figuratively, but they were overpowered by the tremendous events which had closed his career. They were in a mood to expect miracles, and to read back a marvellous significance into all that he had done and said. The promises recorded in the Gospels may in large measure be the outcome of those extravagant hopes which prevailed in the early church. Yet there must have been something in the teaching itself that warranted the interpretation now placed on it.

Admitting, however, that he worked with apocalyptic ideas it by no means follows that everything in his message must be fitted into a "consistent eschatology". This phrase, indeed, is meaningless, for the one thing certain about Jewish apocalyptic thinking is that it had no consistency. In their forecasts of the final events no two of the extant writings are consistent with each other, and no one writing, for that part, is consistent with itself. There are certain broad ideas which pervade apocalyptic as a whole, but the different writers all feel themselves at liberty to modify and adapt them, and to express their own beliefs in terms of the traditional imagery. Are we to demand from Jesus alone that every detail in his forecast must bear a fixed meaning, and fit in exactly with a rigid scheme? We recognise that the authors of Enoch and 4 Esdras had a practical purpose in view, and that it modified and controlled their apocalyptic thinking. Are we to assume that Jesus sacrificed everything to apocalyptic consistency? He may surely be credited also with some practical religious purpose, which meant more to him than the forms in which he expressed it.

So the apocalyptic of Jesus is not consistent, even if it be granted that his teaching is mainly apocalyptic. But this cannot be granted. The apocalyptic element does not bulk largely in

the record, even as we have it, and when due allowance is made for all that has been read in by the evangelists it shrinks to a far smaller proportion. The affinities of Jesus when we judge him by his teaching as a whole were much more with the prophets than with the apocalyptists. That the apocalyptic strain is present, often where we might least suspect it, need not be denied. It runs through the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer, as well as through the sayings about the future. But its function almost everywhere is to enforce a message that is *not* apocalyptic. Even for John the Baptist the hope of the Kingdom had value, not for its own sake, but as the lever for a moral appeal. "The day is at hand,—you are to stand presently before the Judge: therefore repent." Much more the real message of Jesus is independent of the apocalyptic ideas and can easily be detached from them. His demand was for a new kind of life, a new relation to God, and while he looked for the Kingdom his interest was in those moral requirements which it involved.

Indeed it may fairly be argued that although Jesus fell in with the apocalyptic outlook his thought was in inward contradiction to it, and that not a few of the difficulties which have been brought to light by the modern enquiry are due to this cause. The two outstanding features of apocalyptic thought are that the Kingdom lies in the future, and that it will come suddenly by the immediate act of God. However much they differ in their conceptions the apocalyptists all share these two primary beliefs; and they could not do otherwise, in view of the very nature of apocalyptic. It was the outgrowth of a profound pessimism. For the time being God seemed to have withdrawn from the government of the world. Doubtless he was still King, but with the evil present He could do nothing, and His people must be content to wait patiently for the coming day when he would assert His sovereignty. It followed that when His Kingdom *did* come it would appear suddenly and miraculously. In the world now running to decay there were no regenerating forces which by their own action would gradually bring about the better time. God must Himself interpose, by an immediate act of power.

Now these fundamental beliefs of apocalyptic were both foreign to the mind of Jesus. Not only so, but they were directly opposed

to the convictions he lived by, and which underlie all his teaching. He believed that God rules the world and that everything is ordered by Him, so that not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge. In this absolute trust that God is sovereign he submitted himself unreservedly to the will of God, and called on his followers to do likewise. To be sure he says much about the coming Kingdom, yet what he demands is not the apocalyptic faith that in some future time all wrongs will be righted, but the faith that God is reigning now, in spite of all the mystery in which His ways are enshrouded. This is the very heart of the religion of Jesus. If we conceive of him as merely the herald of a future Kingdom we take the key-stone out of his teaching and out of the whole story of his life. In like manner, he is in conflict with the apocalyptic view that no forces for good are working in the present, and that if the Kingdom comes it must break in by a miraculous act. He sees the goodness of God in the rain and the sunshine, in the natural kindness of men to one another, in the impulses that are continually leading them to better things. He makes his appeal, ever and again, to the goodness that is present in men, and tries to foster and direct it, so that it may help on the divine purposes. Not only does he recognise that forces for good are operative, but he believes that in the last resort there are no other forces. Evil by its nature is unreal and self-destructive. Only the good has power, and those who follow it may be confident that sooner or later it will overcome, and fulfil itself. With such a belief as this he did not need to expect the apocalyptic miracle. To stake everything upon it would indeed have been little short of treason to his own deepest convictions. Men had come to look for it because their faith had failed, because they had ceased to discern the moral forces or had despaired of their effecting anything. The whole aim of Jesus was to restore that faith which apocalyptic, with its doctrine of a Kingdom which could only come by miracle, had implicitly denied.

There has been much discussion of those isolated sayings in which Jesus appears to speak of the Kingdom as in some sense present. Most of them can be explained away, and it has often been assumed that when we have got rid of them his thought

falls perfectly into line with that of the apocalyptists. To some writers this has appeared so certain that they construe the ethical teaching as nothing more than an "interim ethic", valid only for the short interval before the Kingdom will set in. Others, like Professor Lake in the "Beginnings of Christianity", have more justly inferred that Jesus did not bind himself to apocalyptic theory, but was influenced also by Rabbinical conceptions of the Kingdom as already in being. A new and hopeful field of enquiry is opened by this suggestion. But the problem after all is not one of balancing a few disputed sayings against a number of others, of apparently different tenor. We have rather to deal with a contradiction between the forms employed by Jesus and the inner drift and purport of his message. He declared that the Kingdom was future and must come suddenly and miraculously, as the apocalyptists had taught; and yet he never wavers in his belief that God is reigning, God is silently working *now*. Was he himself aware of the contradiction? Probably not. He took over the apocalyptic ideas as they were current in his time, without reflecting on their origin or on the philosophy that lay behind them. While accepting them with full sincerity he took from them what he needed, allowing all the rest to fall out of sight. They served to make real to him his vision of a better world, in which the will of God should absolutely prevail. They offered him a definite goal towards which he could work and to which he could point his followers. But all the time they were borrowed from a type of thought which was alien to him, and we are not justified in so emphasizing them as to hide his distinctive message. Jewish apocalyptic, when all is said, has not provided us with the key to the teaching of Jesus. At the most it has given us the key to his mode of expressing himself, to the forms under which he thought and by which he was restricted. The real task still remains of exploring the message itself.

The recent attempts to construe the gospel as an apocalyptic must therefore be regarded as mistaken, or at any rate as one-sided. It would be truer to maintain that Jesus destroyed the apocalyptic view of the world, just as he destroyed the Law, although in both cases he claimed to be fulfilling. While he speaks in apocalyptic language and declares that the expected

Kingdom is just at hand, he throws all the weight on ideas of a moral and spiritual nature. He makes the apocalyptic hope subserve these ideas, which were bound in process of time to burst the apocalyptic sheath. This, as a matter of history, is what happened before the first century was over. The message of Jesus as its true implications came to light was found to have shattered the apocalyptic scheme which at first seemed vital to it. Jesus himself, like other great teachers, was unable to foresee the consequences of his own thought. He held to the apocalyptic beliefs and so expressed his message that it might seem to be wholly determined by them. Millennarians can appeal confidently to his actual words. A writer like Tyrrell can plausibly argue that the concern of Jesus was wholly with the coming supernatural order, and that his gospel is best presented in the symbols and sacraments by which the Catholic church attaches itself to that order. But a deeper criticism will only strengthen the conviction which has always forced itself on the plain sense of Christian men. For the mind of Jesus the apocalyptic ideas were not primary. He believed in the new will, in the wisdom and goodness of the Father who ordains all things, in the moral forces which in the end will overcome all evil. By means of apocalyptic, and when necessary in spite of it, He sought to proclaim this faith.